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AN
ADDRESS
TO THE
PEOPLE OF ENGLAND,
ON THE
INTENDED REFORMATION
OF
PARLIAMENT.

11.
1800.

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AN
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TO THE
PEOPLE OF ENGLAND.

WHATEVER may have been the origin of government, the end of it should confessedly be the happiness of the people who are to be the subjects of that government: and that happiness is most effectually promoted by such a constitution of laws and order, as will tend most, upon the whole, to secure to every individual the enjoyment

ment of his civil and religious rights, those gifts of nature, which no power on earth can with justice wrench from the hands of its possessors. It is impossible to lay down any one particular mode or constitution of government, which may equally be suited to people of all nations and countries. In different periods of national advancement, from imbecillity to extensive dominion, from poverty to affluence, from virtuous morals to dissolute manners; in different climates likewise, where the genius and disposition of the people give so very different turns to their ways of thinking, different forms of government must necessarily be established. It has indeed generally happened, that in a series of years, by continual observation on the effects of diverse political appointments, every nation has at length found out, and patiently



patiently submitted to that state of subordination, which was deemed best fitted for the purposes of its establishment, and seemed best calculated for general good. It were needless to enter into the histories of other countries to prove these truths. The conduct of those wise and disinterested patriots, who brought about the Revolution in our own kingdom, sufficiently convince us that the constitutional government of this country was at length settled in such form and on such principles, as by reflexion on past times, and by experience of past evils, were judged to promise the most perfect and most durable happiness both to the King and people. Sufficient care was taken on the one hand to support his dignity and prerogative; on the other, a proper jealousy was shewn for maintaining the rights and privileges of the people.

And that neither the King on one side, nor people on the other, should infringe each others power, the Lords were as a mediating body, intended to watch both, and to check both, if intemperate in the use of what belonged to them. A government formed on such principles was the admiration of philosophers, the envy of all neighbouring states. It continued in its vigour during the reign of King William, but began to decline in the succeeding reign. Indeed, it could not be conceived that a Stuart would be active in preserving a constitution entire, by which Royal Prerogative was so much limited. At length came a King, whose family was bound in gratitude to favour the people: and there is every reason to imagine he would have spurned at the idea of undue influence, had not his throne been shaken under him

him by the dark and insidious machination of the Pretender's partisans. It was their continual endeavours to recall, if possible, the Stuart family, which forced Sir Robert Walpole to begin the system of bribery and corruption, a system in itself disgraceful to the manners of the people, in its effects injurious to public liberty. The practice begun by Sir Robert has been uniformly pursued by succeeding Ministers, with an exception only of one unparalleled Statesman in the beginning of the present reign, and of him who is now the Prime Minister. It is of national concern to consider the consequences of this practice, and to point out some method by which sanity may be restored to the constitution.

It is a doctrine held by some politicians, that the euthanasia of our constitution

stitution must be an absolute monarchy. Now there are but two possible ways by which absolute monarchy can be established in this country : the one is by force of arms, the other by the corruption of the Commons betraying to the King's Minister the liberties of the people. No King will be able to establish his monarchy by force of arms, so long as the Commons are pure and uncorrupt ; for as it rests with them to vote supplies, it will be in vain for the King to raise a great army, which, without the consent of his Commons, he cannot maintain a single day : and a house of purely uncorrupt Commons will ever look on the military with a jealous eye, and make them as dependent as possible on the people for their very subsistence. Absolute monarchy, therefore, can never be brought about by force of arms in this country, so long

as the Commons are uncorrupt: the only means then by which such a stretch of prerogative could be effected and confirmed, must be the corruption of the Commons, treacherously selling their constituents. If there is reason to suspect that majorities in the House of the Commons have been gained by corruption, be the question what it may; if there is room to imagine that a certain Minister supported himself in carrying on an unpopular war, by no other means than by bribery, direct or indirect, then, my countrymen, your liberty is in danger. But I address not this to the abject and servile, to men who are devoid of public virtue; you are not my countrymen; it is to those who retain principles of honour and justice, to those who love their country and are anxious for its civil and religious freedom; it is to these, I say, your liberty

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is in danger, if not immediately, yet it is ultimately. A Minister buys a Member of the Commons; this Member finds his being in the Minister's pay a lucrative post; he chooses not to loose it, and therefore at a dissolution of Parliament, offers to his constituents a sum of money for the continuance of his seat. A corrupt Borough sells itself to the Member, the Member sells himself to the Minister, and whether right or wrong, for or against the interest of his constituents, votes as he is bid. Now if there are many Boroughs who so sell themselves, and many Members who so traffic for their votes, then is the House of Commons proportionably less the support of the liberties of the people; but it was intended to support those liberties in the first instance; therefore every deviation from the object of its institution is criminal, and demands

demands a preventive correction applied in due time. A reformation of Parliament must be the salvation of your freedom. You will be told that such a reformation is needless; but consider these few points :

1. Is it not absurd that Corfe Castle, or Old Sarum, should send as many members to Parliament as Bristol for instance ?

2. Is it not repugnant to every idea of liberty, nay, is it not arbitrary in the highest degree, for any one man, be he Lord or Common, to hold up his finger only, and bid the servile constituents of his Borough vote according to his direction, on pain of utter ruin to himself and family ? No insolent Vizier in despotic Turkey can be more oppressive, than those tyrants who compel

pel their tenants and dependents to vote as they order them, in spite of their aversion to the candidates. And what are the persons whom these wretched voters are forced to support? Not men endeared to them by birth, by alliance, by vicinity; but eastern plunderers, or northern emigrants, or political adventurers; men totally unknowing of their constituents, and unknown by them. Yet, surely, according to the reason of things, representatives should be connected with their constituents by the nearest and dearest ties of relation and interest. Should this tyranny be suffered in a country, which calls itself free? Is there no spirit of resentment and indignation in the bosoms of Englishmen at such wanton pride, such domineering presumption? Is this your liberty, and will you patiently submit to see your fellow-countrymen disgracing

cing the names of free-born Britons, at the return of every election? But

3. Does it not shock every thinking man, that so many thousands should perjure themselves at every general election? I trust, a sense of reverence for the name of God, and sanctity of an oath, is not yet so far effaced from your hearts, that you can view such a scene of blasphemous profanation without horror.

It will be replied, that if there is so much corruption and so much perjury among the bulk of the people, a reformation founded on principles of virtue will be ineffectual. By parity of reason, if the bulk of the people were infected with the plague, it would be a vain undertaking to begin a medical process, by which those who

are not infected might be preserved untainted, and many of those who are sick might be relieved. I am ready to grant, as far as the false reasoners choose to go, that the people are void of public virtue; but then I will retort on them, that this very argument is the most powerful one which can be produced, in order to shew the necessity of taking some measure to stop the progress of corruption before it becomes general. My own heart and experience tell me, there is yet much generous and disinterested zeal for the public good remaining in many of my countrymen. Cherish their ardour, and excite in others a laudable emulation of public spirit, if you can by virtuous motives, if not, by cutting off every possible method by which either a candidate may bribe, or a constituent be bribed. Destroy the boroughs notoriously

toriously corrupt, add to the counties and large towns more members, extend the right of voting to copyholders and stockholders in counties, and to all housekeepers in towns; and limit the duration of Parliament to the term of three years. The consequences of such an alteration would be, that the constituents would be so numerous as to render all attempts to bribe entirely abortive, because the virulence of corruption could not spread itself so sufficiently wide, but what the majority of voters must still be under no undue influence; and if the duration of Parliament was for no longer than three years, it would not be worth while for a representative to purchase a seat in a House, where there was no certainty of his indemnifying himself before another dissolution would take place, and he must then have recourse to the same
 expence

expence again to be reinstated in his
 seat. Add to this, that your members
 will be much more dependent on you,
 and of course more attentive to you
 and your interests, the oftener they are
 obliged to solicit for your free votes.
 According to the present system, if the
 members of a borough honour their
 constituents with one annual visit, it is
 deemed a great favour, a mark of con-
 descension truly, adequate to all the
 services which the burgeses can pos-
 sibly confer on them. Considering the
 connexion, which, according to the
 right of things, should ever subsist be-
 tween the constituents and represen-
 tatives, this insolent disrespect and in-
 attention of members to their boroughs
 ought to excite the indignation of ge-
 nerous minds. Every man who lives
 in a free country should have some
 share of laudable pride; a pride, I
 mean,

mean, which should make him spurn at the idea of being despised by the very persons who derive honours and emoluments from their being members of Parliament, and who could not be such but by the votes of their constituents. Burgesses and freeholders, in short, electors of every denomination, are naturally inclined to treat their members with respect, and even with regard, if honest and upright in discharge of their important duties: the representatives therefore need not fear that they would degrade their dignity by more frequent intercourse with the people they respectively represent; the contrary would be the consequence; they would gain the confidence and affection of their people, that only sure ground on which popular dignity can be founded. Nothing therefore derogatory from the respect
 due

due to representatives is meant by obliging representatives to have recourse more often to their constituents for their support; it is intended only that no one member should immediately after his election think himself independent of his borough for seven years to come. Members thus negligent and regardless of their constituents, can scarcely be said to be representatives of people with whom they carry on little or no connexion. The general wishes of the people at large would certainly be more truly signified, and more fully expressed, were their members more frequently brought down to mix among them, and to collect their general sense on matters of great importance, of national concern. But the very reverse is now the case; for members vote to serve their own interests, and then take pains to bribe a majority

majority of their constituents into an approbation, or at least a tacit assent, to the propriety of their conduct. But, were the right of voting extended in towns to all housekeepers, there certainly would be numbers in every place represented, who would be influenced by no other consideration than that of public good, and who would commend or disapprove of their members conduct, accordingly as it merited either applause or censure. The approbation of such would indeed redound to the credit of representatives; it would animate their generous minds to pursue with steady firmness and unbiaſſed integrity those measures which were really conducive to the welfare of the nation; whereas, in the present situation of affairs, the welfare of the nation is too often the last thing considered, the praise of the honest is disregarded, the

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fawning

fawning adulation of cringing mercenaries is extorted from creatures who dare not but flatter, even whilst in their hearts they must condemn, their members.

It is natural to expect that much pains will be taken to frustrate the endeavours of those who wish to reform Parliament; but, People of England, are you to consult your own security, or the interest of about five hundred in the House of Commons? Are you to provide for the general liberty, or are you to resign all into the hands of men who will sell you to another branch of the legislature, and thereby give that branch more power than it ought to have consistently with your good?

You

You will be told, that it is true there are some absurdities in the present mode of representation, but they are grown venerable by long usage. It is by such language that men of indolent and debauched minds excuse themselves from undertaking any measures that will require some labour in planning and executing. A drowsy inactivity has seized on the spirit of this country; it enervates the vigour of patriotism, it checks the ardor of enterprise: we prefer destruction with ease to reformation with some degree of trouble. *Venerable* absurdities is a contradiction in terms; every thing absurd is contemptible. Besides, the absurdities in representation cannot be deemed venerable, for they are in their immediate effects, and even more so in their future consequences, prejudicial to that freedom of the people, which the

House of Commons should preserve inviolate. In matters of indifference, such as customs and fashionable regulations, absurdities may be permitted, may be necessary; but in politics, nothing absurd can be salutary; therefore remove these absurdities of representation, which the soft debauchee calls venerable, which the active reformer calls destructive.

You will be told, that the fortunes of many families depend on the sale of boroughs at the general elections. —I recall my words—no, let us hope that no member in either House is as yet so hackneyed in the ways of corruption, as to dare to make this an objection to a reform, or to avow (what however is the truth) that such scandalous traffic is carried on. You need not be told this; you hear of it

it in common conversation; you feel the baleful effects of it. Would I then that those who have these boroughs to sell, should be so materially injured as to be robbed of them? In strict justice, the authors and abettors of so infamous a trade ought to be punished severely; and it is false compassion to spare some few rich rascals, when the public welfare must suffer by such ill-timed lenity. But to obviate all objections arising from this head, to shew that nothing injurious is in any degree intended to any one individual in the kingdom, let Government pay an equitable price to every holder of such borough, as an indemnification for the loss of it: surely, if by such a measure public liberty could be more effectually secured, it would be worth while to purchase such an object, and at the expence even of many thousands of pounds.

You

You will be told, that the people have been always most clamorous for liberty, when their liberty has been least in danger. This is fallacious; and many have been led to draw false conclusions from this assertion. The very reverse of it is the truth, viz. the people have been always most clamorous for liberty, when their liberty was most in danger; and it was from a sense, an experience of the danger, that they were roused to be clamorous. Men of sense and moderation submit chearfully to just government; but when the law of the nation must give way to the will of the court, when arbitrary pleasure takes place of legal appointment, it is then they exert themselves in defence of their rights. What excited the Barons to demand the *Great Charter*, but the tyranny and oppression of King John? Whence originated the
petition

petition of rights, and *Habeas Corpus*, but from the absolute necessity by which the people were forced to be vigilant, in order to stop the enormities of prerogative? Was it not the arbitrary despotism of that cruel and weak tyrant James the Second, which roused the people to expel him, and to gain *the Bill of Rights* from the Prince of Orange? And was it not the tendency of Queen Anne's Ministers to extend the prerogative, which occasioned the new provisions inserted in the *Act of Settlement*, for the better securing of laws and liberties? The periods in which all these concessions in favour of the people were made, were preceded by tyrannous oppression: it was that oppression which compelled the people to stand up as one man, in order to support their natural birthrights, which they saw endangered: nor is there any æra in the English history,

history, wherein the people have been clamorous for liberty, unless there had antecedently been evident marks of a design in the crown to encroach enormously on that liberty. It is true the people when combined always have, and always shall obtain proper security of their indefeasible rights; but then they never have, or will combine, without sufficient reason for so doing, without just cause of alarm and jealousy for the public good.

You will be told, that innovations are dangerous. They are so, and on that very ground it is that we found the necessity of a reform in Parliament. It is not we who innovate, it is they who would overturn the equilibrium of power, by throwing too much from one branch of the legislature into the scale of another. Our wish is to preserve

serve the constitution entire, as settled at the Revolution: they are the innovators who aim at sapping the foundation of our constitution as then settled. We would have King, Lords, and Commons, three bodies, distinct: they are the innovators, who would confound the three orders, by joining any two against the other one, and thus destroy the level of the just balance. We would have the people in real earnest a part of the legislature; it is their ancient birthright to enjoy this privilege: it is they are the innovators who wish to steal away this birthright, who by subtilty contrive to have the voice of the People absorbed in that of the King.

My Countrymen, the constitution of this country is King, Lords, and Commons; a constitution this, gained at

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length

length by the wisdom, valour, firmness, integrity, intrepidity of our ancestors. It was purchased with blood; it was bought with the price of all things valuable to them. Be zealous to maintain that form of government, which the prudence of your forefathers knew to be the best, which their determined spirit did therefore establish.

The government of a monarch is arbitrary and oppressive; that of an aristocracy is productive of more oppression, of jealousies, and eternal seditions: a democracy is inconsistent, disorderly, and feeble. That is the best form of government, which will most effectually secure the liberty of the subject from licentiousness and confusion on the one hand, and from tyrannical oppression on the other. A due temperament of the three forms just mentioned

tioned is best calculated for that purpose. Limit the power of the monarch; make the nobles so connected with the people, that they can have but one common interest; admit the people to give their assent to every law which is to bind them; and make not only the people, but the nobles, and even the monarch himself, as much bound to obey the laws as the poorest subject: nay, teach the monarch, that the moment he violates a law, he has forfeited the compact between him and his people, and is amenable to any court of justice, or at least to the nobles and representatives of the people. A constitution formed on these principles, as it makes but one general good, must above all others be best suited to promote general happiness, the very essence of which is civil and religious liberty. Such a constitution was our's at the Re-

volution, and such it will be again if you stand forth with firmness and unanimity in reforming the growing influence of corruption, the tendency of which is to strengthen the hands either of the monarch or the nobles, and of course to weaken the power of the people. Unless you can be so lost to all common sense, as to suppose that eight millions of people were formed to be oppressed by the two other parts of the legislature, dare to assert your rights of having free and independent representatives, of preserving that order, which allotted is you in the legislature, distinct, entire, uninfluenced.— Yet in this and every national concern be wisdom your guide ; let nothing be done that may wear any appearance of unruly violence. Let your counsels be serious ; let your resolutions be well and prudently conceived ; execute your resolutions

solutions with unshaken steadiness in such manner as may be consistent with public peace and public happiness.

Every thing human is subject to decay. The body politic no less than the natural body is injured by length of years, and from time to time requires a healing hand. The period is come, when the work of reparation and reformation is loudly called for; it is seasonable, it is necessary, to eradicate from the House of Commons the evils of corruption, evils which are disgraceful to national virtue, which are fatal to popular freedom.



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